

Purchase signals next chapter for center

County pays \$5 million for Long Reach Village Center

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When Karen Hitcho moved to Columbia's Village of Long Reach in 1979, she recalls the village center being a "vibrant hub" of activity.

In the past few years, however, it has been far from that. High vacancy rates, stemming largely from the departure of grocers Safeway and the Family Market, and a lack of attention to the shopping center's conditions led to decreasing patronage and hardship for some of its tenants.

The situation became so dire that, earlier this year, the County Council declared the area a blight zone, which allowed the government to step in and purchase the property with the intention of redeveloping it — a bold move even by Howard County's progressive standards.

On Monday, approximately 150 residents, elected officials and other stakeholders gathered in the center to plant a tree to mark the county's \$5 million purchase of the property, which was finalized Oct. 1. For Hitcho, who also serves as the chairwoman of the village association's Board of Directors, and others in attendance, the day signaled a turning point for the community's focal point.

"It may be a little overcast, but it is a beautiful day," Hitcho said.

County Council chairman and Long Reach representative Calvin Ball, who helped lead the county's effort, agreed.

"Many of us believe, and still believe, in that [Columbia founder] Jim Rouse, Columbia vision. That vision where village centers are a gathering place, where people meet and build community," Ball said to the crowd.

"I can't tell you how good I feel about the bold and innovative step that we've taken, together as a community, not only to turn the page on Rouse's vision for Columbia, but to continue writing that next chapter," he said.

While concrete redevelopment plans have not been completed, the county and community seem intent on making the area a center for the arts, which could include relocating the Howard County Arts Council — currently in Ellicott City — to the center.

The Columbia Arts Center, a facility run by the Columbia Association, is already located on site.

"We have a vision here for the Long Reach Village Center, a shared vision. That vision includes bringing people together with arts and culture and making Long Reach a destination," Ball said.

Mark Thompson, the county's director of downtown development and point person for the project, said that because it can not lure a grocery store, the center needs an alternative anchor to survive.

"When you think about redevelopment opportunities in shopping centers like this, where the retail market has changed dramatically ... you have to look at alternative uses. And we feel strongly that the arts are a great alternative use," he said.

He added: "The arts can serve as a great demand-driver to then support the retail much like Safeway used to."

Thompson said the county will retain two consultant groups to help them shape the redevelopment vision: a design firm that will help create a planning process to

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STAFF PHOTO BY LUKE LAVOIE

Mark Thompson, left, director of downtown development for Howard County, leads county officials and community members on a tour of the Long Reach Village Center Monday at an event held to mark the county's purchase of the property.

include community engagement, and an arts consultant that will help identify potential arts-related uses for the center, as well as downtown Columbia.

The total cost of both consultants is estimated at \$250,000.

Thompson estimates it will take a year before a vision can be formulated and then presented to the County Council for approval. In the meantime, the county is in "stabilization mode," which Thompson said means filling the vacancies and evaluating existing tenants.

The county has retained Paragon Commercial Property Management to manage the property.

Part of that stabilization process includes Celebration Church, a Long Reach congregation that has plans to purchase and move into the 55,000-square-foot space left vacant by Safeway.

The large space, which was not part of the county purchase, is currently held by previous landlord, an affiliated company

of Americas Realty Corp.

The Rev. Robbie Davis said the county's purchase was courageous, and added that the church is "honored" to be a part of the redevelopment.

"To see the government, the arts community and the faith community come together to build something powerful, strong and unique is something for all of us to behold," he said.

County Council vice chairwoman Courtney Watson echoed Ball's support and also touted the courage of her fellow council members and County Executive Ken Ulman in backing the move.

"This is not something that is done on a routine basis around the state and even in Howard County. But in Howard County we come up with solutions working together with different partners," she said.

Ulman, who was not in attendance, said in a statement that this is "the start of beginning to reimagine a new life for this village center."